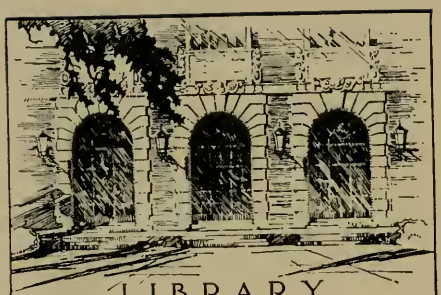

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THE CHURCH IN WALES.

A SPEECH

BY THE

RIGHT HON. W. E. GLADSTONE, M.P.,

IN

THE HOUSE OF COMMONS,

ON

FEBRUARY 20, 1891.

SIXTH THOUSAND.

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MR. GLADSTONE ON THE CHURCH IN WALES.

Speaking in the House of Commons on Mr. Pritchard Morgan's motion in favour of Disestablishment in Wales, on Friday, Feb. 20, 1891, Mr. Gladstone said:—

"I feel myself, Sir, indebted to the courtesy of the hon. member opposite, who is to move the amendment to this motion, for having waived his claim to press that amendment immediately after the speech of the seconder of the motion. I am bound to say that I am glad to have an early opportunity of intervening in the debate, because I do not think that I am able to adopt wholesale all the statements made by the hon. member who brought forward this motion in his comprehensive speech. I shall exercise a just right in stating to the House, in my own tone and manner, my views on the question, and in dealing with the subject in a way less likely to sharpen the opposition than my hon. friend found it necessary for himself to adopt, with the views he takes of the present action of the Established Church in Wales.

"If I go back for a period of fifty years—and my own knowledge of Wales has extended over the full range of that term—I could not speak of the Established Church in Wales at that period as I am able to speak of it now. At that period its administration was undoubtedly open in many ways to very heavy censure, and

Fifty Years Ago and Now.

feebleness was everywhere—or almost everywhere—manifest in its discharge of its duties. At present, however, the case is different.

Mr. Pritchard Morgan's Inaccuracies.

"I do not look at this motion of my hon. friend with a disposition to apply the microscope to its wording, because I might be obliged to say that it does not coincide with my own views in one or two particulars. In the first place, I do not think that there is great historical precision in the words which the motion adopts, though I understand the motives leading to their adoption. There is, for instance, a phrase which describes the Established Church in Wales as the Church of England in Wales. As far as I know the history of the case—and I have done my best to acquaint myself with it, though I believe that there is no standard work on the history of the Established Church in Wales during the whole of the long period over which it has existed—but as far as I know that history, we might really speak with as much justice of the Church of Wales in England as of the Church of England in Wales.

The History of the Church in Wales.

"We know that towards the close of the sixth century of the Christian era—and I hope that the House will not be dismayed at my going back so far, for I will certainly pass over the intermediate period when England was still barbarous to a great extent, and wholly dechristianized in the south and centre—Christianity was flourishing in the northern extremity—which was in partnership with Scotch Christianity—and also in portions of the west, which were connected with Wales. For St. Augustine or his representatives—the missionaries sent by Pope Gregory VIII.—were met by bodies of Welsh Christians, who represented the Christian Church existing in the country from a very early time, and reinforced by refugee British, who were driven by the Anglo Saxon pressure into these western districts. These were the true representatives of the Church in Wales, which Church has, as far as I am aware, continued from that day to this—that is, looking at it from without and in its corporate capacity. This is a very curious history—the history of the

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Church in Wales. It would be difficult to find in any portion of Christendom a more signal example of magnanimous and self-denying conduct on the part of the body of the people than the effort which has been made—especially during the present century—by the Nonconformists of Wales to make a provision for their own religion. It is not to be asserted that at all periods the Welsh people have felt the deficiency of that provision.

"It is a very curious fact that what is termed the Anglican administration, as it operated in Wales, conferred upon the people of Wales one very great and signal blessing, which was highly appreciated by them, and that was the introduction of their mother-tongue into the services of the Church. It was a thing which could be dispensed with perhaps in England, where the language was strong, and where its roots ran through every fibre of the community. But in Wales the language was weak, drooping and losing ground; and it was owing to the introduction of the mother-tongue into the services of the Church that the Welsh people were, for a long time after the Reformation, Established Churchmen. My hon. friend will find testimony to that fact in the history of Mr. Hallam, and in other historical authorities. In point of fact, no person could have more conclusively established the point than has the hon. member himself to-night; because he went back—and I am very much obliged for the interesting information which he gave us—to the year 1676; and he showed us that at that time, while the strength of the Church was represented by 391,000 persons, the strength of Nonconformity at that period—that is to say, the strength of Puritanism—was only 10,000. It would have been impossible at that period—if my hon. friend had been a member of the House of Commons in 1676 instead of in 1891—it would have been impossible for him at that time to have made a motion to the effect that the Church in Wales had failed to fulfil its professed object, and ministered only to a smal minority of the population.

The Debt Due to the Church.

"After that came a period most unhappy and most deplorable

for Wales, when the Welsh language was put aside, and when, in neglect of native claims, Englishmen came in to occupy every bishopric, every deanery, and every benefice that was thought to be desirable. Then the Welsh people were driven, as I may say, into the wilderness, and then the Welsh people, who are now and who have always been a most devout and religious people, felt the grievous necessity under which they were placed, and they set about what was, for them, the gigantic effort of providing the means, the ordinances, and the material appliances of religion. That is the case; and it is a circumstance of great satisfaction to me that, in approaching the question as it now stands, I have nothing to do but to confess my sincere and hearty congratulations for both sides.

A Period of Neglect.

"I believe that there is great activity in the Welsh Church. I have seen it grow under my own eyes. I am not now speaking of my own parish. That is a large, populous parish, where the Welsh tongue has never been native, and which is, like many other parishes in Wales, much more Welsh than English in its circumstances. But I do not hesitate to say that though I believe the precepts of Nonconformity are not narrowing, that the energy of Nonconformity is not diminished; that it retains its place in the hearts of the mass of the people; yet the efforts and exertions of the Church now and for a good many years, and the growing and increasing efforts, are such as do, in my opinion, great credit to the energy both of the clergy and the laity of that Church. I render them ungrudging recognition; and I do not think it my duty on this occasion to withhold any portion of the praise which is their due.

Present Life and Activity.

"A representation was made to me to-day by a dignitary of the Established Church, and it is this. He founded himself on a book which is an Anglican authority—the 'Official Year Book of the Church of England'—and which may be termed, in a certain sense, authoritative, and which is friendly to the Established Church in Wales. What he told me was this. That the rental of

The Liberality of Welsh Churchmen.

Wales, as compared with the total rental of England and Wales, was 4 per cent.; that the population of Wales, as compared with the total population of England and Wales, was 6 per cent. But that the contributions of Churchmen towards religious objects and the support of the Church in Wales, as compared with the total contributions of England and Wales to the same objects was not 4 per cent. or 6 per cent., but no less than 14 per cent. That is a statement which contrasts with the painful, with the extremely disgraceful records of the past which is now becoming remote; and in endeavouring to do justice to Wales I find myself not in the slightest degree able, any more than I am disposed, to found this motion upon the idea that there is on the part of the clergy of the Established Church in Wales the slightest tendency or disposition to neglect their duty, or that there is not abundant evidence of the inspiring efforts—and in many cases the very self-denying efforts—which they make to extend the administration of the Church.'

"I quite agree with my hon. friend in one point, which is not immaterial. He says, with perfect truth, that there is a very considerable English immigration into Wales. There is a mining immigration which leads to an English demand in the matter of religion, although I believe it is also a remarkable circumstance that the families of these English miners ultimately become Welsh, adopt the Welsh language, and tend to swell the number of persons speaking Welsh. But at the same time there is an English immigration. There is also a very considerable immigration of English to the watering-places of Wales. That may account for some portion of the remarkable figures which the defenders of the Established Church are able to allege on their own behalf; but I do not think that it at all abates what has been said in regard to the increasing devotion of the people, as well as of the ministers and governors of the Church, in the prosecution of their duties.

English Immigration.

"Then the question is asked, 'Why interfere with this state of things?' If the Church is active and progressive, and if the Nonconformists are contented, why interfere?

Then 'Why Interfere.'

"But, Sir, the Nonconformists are not contented; and the question is whether they are entitled to be contented. The Nonconformists are making in the most distinct terms, in a voice very audible indeed, and governed with all the forms of the constitution, a demand which I for one think it my duty to listen to, and which I feel convinced before any great length of time has elapsed, even quite irrespective of the present divisions of party, this House will have to listen to and will be disposed to listen to. I agree with almost everything that was said by my hon. friend the seconder of this motion, who spoke with a weight which belongs to his high character and his long devotion to this cause. I think he is perfectly right in what he said with respect to the vivid sentiment of nationality in Wales. I do not think that the Welsh people are disposed to make inconvenient claims on that subject. I believe that whatever they ask will be confined within the bounds of reason and moderation. But I do think that my hon. friend is entirely justified in stating that that sentiment exists, and exists with great force and activity, in Wales; and that the people of Wales will ask, and will expect, and, so far as they constitutionally can, even will insist, that in the proceedings of the British Parliament due regard shall be had to these several and distinct claims which the Welsh people within their own bounds and limits are warranted in making."

Must Defer to Nonconformist Demands.

After a good-humoured reference to the declaration of Lord Hartington with regard to Disestablishment in Scotland as being a question for the people of Scotland, and observing that "the parallelism in the case of Scotland and Wales has yet to be confirmed," Mr. Gladstone proceeded:—

"I do not question that I shall be fairly and properly saluted with citations from a speech of my own on a former occasion I do not remember exactly in what year. (Sir G. Trevelyan —1870.) Twenty-one years ago! Since that time I have had

time to be born again and come of age. The passage to which reference is made is to the effect that it was impossible to separate the Church of Wales from the Church of England. I may have used that expression. I think it very possible that when the question of Disestablishment in Wales was proposed, more as the judgment of an individual or group of individuals than as the distinct expression of a strong, deliberate, and pervading national sentiment—it is quite possible that I may have used that expression which may, when strictly regarded, be found to involve an element of exaggeration. I might have said in my judgment that it was impossible to reconstruct and readjust the income-tax in this country; but, at the same time, if the people of England, in their deliberate mind and by an overwhelming majority, arrive at the conclusion that that was to be done, it would be the duty of members of Parliament to set about it and do it.

Can the Case of Wales be Separated from that of England?

"I say now what I believed then, and what I believe now, that the operation of disestablishing the Church of Wales from the Church of England will not be an easy one. I suspect it will be found that it is tied and knotted and tangled, I might also say, in such a multitude of legal bonds or meshes with the general body of the Church of England, that it would be a very formidable matter indeed to accomplish this untying purpose. I think the mover of this motion was wise in not having made any such attempt, which, if it is to be done, is to be done by the Government; and I have not the least doubt that it will require all the skill, all the knowledge, all the care, all the sense of equity and moderation that it will be possible to bring to bear upon it, in order to carry through that work in a satisfactory manner."

Disestablishment of Welsh Church not an Easy Task.

Having rallied the Tory party on the "impossible" questions which they had subsequently found possible, and having insisted that "undoubtedly the Established Church in Wales is an advancing Church, an active Church, a living Church, and I

hope very distinctly a rising Church from elevation to elevation," Mr. Gladstone concluded by saying that in the face of a large majority of Welsh members being pledged to support disestablishment, he could no longer resist their demand, and expressed his conviction that "the people of England, who are eminently a just people, will give and will insist on giving to Wales in respect of her reasonable demands the same just, equitable, and conclusive settlement which in the like circumstances I believe they would claim for themselves."

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